ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Place branding: is it public policy, or isn't it?

Mihails Potapovs[1]

Abstract

This article explores the question of whether place branding should be considered a public policy. While place branding has gained attention in the fields of marketing and related disciplines, its connection to various public policy areas highlights its broader implications. This study aims to provide conceptual clarity on the matter, arguing for the inclusion of place branding within the public policy discourse. The article employs a conceptual framework to assess the alignment of place branding with the key attributes of public policy. A comparative case study of nation branding practices in seven European countries—Estonia, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain, and Slovakia—is conducted to assess the applicability of the conceptual framework of public policy to studying nation branding. The case study demonstrates the potential of such approach, highlighting gaps and challenges in the current practices of nation branding. The article concludes by discussing the implications of applying the policy approach to place branding and exploring future research opportunities.

Keywords Place branding · Nation branding · Public policy · Case study · Evidence-informed policy making

Introduction

Fifteen years ago, in his iconic editorial to this journal, Anholt (2008) argued that place branding "is not about communications but policies", stressing the significance of synergy between strategy, substance and symbolic actions for successful implementation of these policies. Albeit originating from the marketing realm, place branding is related to many different public policy areas, such as tourism (Dredge and Jenkins 2003), immigration (Cleave and Arku 2020), investment (Metaxas 2010), development (Kotler et al. 2004), urbanism (Lucarelli 2018), environment (Andersson and James 2018), and even foreign and security policy (van Ham 2008a). The strong and often inseparable relationship between place branding activities and sectoral policies raises the question of whether place branding should be considered a distinct area of public policy.

Meanwhile, over the past few decades, the notion of place branding has been largely absent from the public policy discourse. While the limited interest among scholars may be overlooked, the lack of attention from policymakers is a matter of concern, as most place branding activities are typically mandated and carried out by public institutions, using public financial and administrative resources and being coordinated with public activities in other policy areas such as trade, tourism, and foreign policy. The lack of transparency and accountability associated with place branding activities, including lack of instruments to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of place branding (Florek et al. 2019) may not only hinder the achievement of policy goals but also have far-reaching political consequences, such as undermining trust in the respective institutions altogether.

That is why understanding the role of place branding within the realm of public policy is crucial. The purpose of this paper is to explore whether place branding can be considered a public policy. By scrutinizing the theoretical underpinnings and analysing real-world practices in different countries, this research aims to contribute nuanced insights into the relationship between place branding and the broader domain of public policy. The paper seeks not only to delineate the formal alignment of place branding with key characteristics of public policy from a theoretical perspective but also to illuminate the practical implications, challenges, and opportunities associated with adopting a public policy lens, notably employing the analytical framework of the public policy process, in understanding and shaping place branding endeavours.

✉ Mihails Potapovs
    mihails.potapovs@lu.lv

[1] Department of Political Science, University of Latvia, Raiņa bulvāris 19, Riga LV-1586, Latvia

The first section critically examines the concepts of place branding and public policy from a theoretical standpoint, with the aim of gauging the alignment of place branding with the fundamental characteristics of public policy. The second section delves into a comparative case study of nation branding practices across seven countries, using the policy process framework to guide the analysis, allowing to assess the applicability of the policy process model to place branding but also determine the consistency of the place branding cycle with the broader public policy cycle. The second section also explores and discusses major challenges identified in the nation branding practices at each phase of the public policy process. The third and final section synthesizes the findings, examining the implications of adopting a public policy approach to place branding, and opens avenues for future research by outlining potential areas of exploration and inquiry.

Place branding and public policy

Understanding place branding

To assess whether place branding can be regarded as public policy, a clear understanding of the concept is essential. Place branding lacks a precise definition, leaving room for various interpretations, from basic marketing techniques to advanced reputation-building strategies involving many stakeholders. Clarifying the notions of 'place' and 'branding' is imperative to grasp the term's essence. The term 'place' in 'place branding' generally refers to a geographic entity, such as a town, city, region, or country, and can extend to cross-border regions like the Benelux or even supranational entities like the European Union (Åkerhielm et al. 2003; Anholt 2007a; Aveline 2006). It can also be interchanged with a term describing a particular type of place, for instance, 'city branding', 'region branding', 'country branding', 'nation branding', or more generally 'location branding' (Hanna and Rowley 2008). However, it is important to distinguish 'place branding' from 'destination branding', which specifically focuses on portraying a place as a tourism destination (Briciu 2013). In this sense, 'place branding' and 'location branding' are more inclusive, encompassing various areas beyond tourism, such as promoting exports, attracting investments, and attaining political goals.

As this paper primarily focuses on nation branding as a subtype of place branding, it is important to discuss the particularities of nation branding that set it apart from the branding of other cities or regions, for example. The most obvious differentiator is the scale, closely intertwined with the available resources, both in terms of substantial funding and administrative capacity. Unlike city or regional

branding, nation branding operates within a framework characterized by dedicated structures, including a comprehensive architecture of institutions with clear delineation of responsibilities and tasks, underpinned by experienced and skilled personnel, often civil servants, possessing notable analytical and policy planning capabilities. The presence of established systems, tools, guidelines, manuals, and procedures further enhances the efficiency and effectiveness of the nation branding system.

Another important aspect is the horizontal coordination capabilities. The broad scope of functions and policy areas, coupled with interrelations between institutions, facilitates a robust system of coordination. Moreover, the regulatory capacity and political authority of national governments significantly surpass those of regional and local counterparts. National governments not only possess the exclusive right to create nationwide legislation but also extend their legislative powers over regional and local governments, ensuring effective vertical coordination and policy implementation at all levels. Furthermore, such policy areas as foreign affairs and security policy fall under the exclusive prerogative of national governments. This is crucial given the close relationship between nation branding and diplomacy. National governments often maintain extensive diplomatic networks, typically exceeding the capabilities of regional representations. Interactions between countries at the national level extend beyond regional and city engagements, often at the highest levels of government, providing a broader and more impactful field for nation branding initiatives.

At the same time, nation branding is notably more challenging, as any nation's multifaceted identity, deeply rooted in historical, cultural, and socio-political dimensions, requires a more sophisticated approach. Country branding is intricately linked to its global reputation, wielding substantial influence. The branding of nations incorporates integral elements such as national policies, governance, economic standing, political significance, and contributions on the world stage—dimensions less emphasized in the context of city or regional branding. Unlike the more localized focus of city or regional branding on specific attributes, national branding encapsulates the essence of an entire nation. This broader perspective demands a holistic approach that integrates historical legacies, economic considerations, and diplomatic relations, rendering national branding a distinctive and complex undertaking.

While the concept of 'place' is straightforward, the notion of 'branding' is more intricate. Anholt (2005) distinguishes three broad uses of the term: popular, simple, and advanced. The popular interpretation is the most imprecise, being viewed as a marketing buzzword that broadly encompasses contemporary selling activities, often mistakenly mixed with advertising, marketing, PR, and sales promotion. It also carries negative connotations

from its historical association with livestock branding. The simple interpretation is employed by marketing firms to describe the visual elements of an entity's identity, such as the name, logo, slogan, and corporate livery, which serve as a means of recognition and communication about the nature and personality of the product, and the intended target audience. The third, advanced definition encompasses a broad range of corporate strategy, consumer behaviour, communications, ethics, and purpose. It involves navigating the complex relationships between the brand's personality, those involved in its production and consumption, and various stakeholders. Due to such conceptual complexity, Anholt (2007b) suggested using the term 'competitive identity', however, it did not gain widespread acceptance.

Rephrasing Fan (2010), place branding can be defined as a process by which a place's images can be created, monitored, evaluated and proactively managed in order to improve or enhance the reputation of the place among a target (international) audience. Both image and reputation represent specific states or conditions at given moments, while place branding is a continuous process with the objective of attaining such desired state. In public policy terms, the process of place branding could be described as an *intervention* with the intended *outcome* of projecting a positive image of a place, ultimately having a positive *impact* on its reputation. It is also worth noting that image and reputation can be influenced by various factors, including domestic affairs, economic conditions, and foreign policy, which may exist independently of deliberate place branding efforts. Furthermore, image and reputation often exist prior to the implementation of place branding initiatives. Many places already possess a distinct image and reputation that have developed over time, even without intentional place branding efforts. Place branding, therefore, aims to shape, enhance, or modify existing perceptions rather than solely creating them from scratch.

Distinctions should be made between place branding and soft power. Albeit profoundly related, these concepts are not synonymous. Coined by Nye (1990), the term 'soft power' generally refers to the ability of a nation-state to obtain preferred outcomes by persuasion and attraction rather than coercion or force. Place branding (or rather specifically nation branding) can be instrumental to fostering such ability. Nye (2008) argues that a country's soft power primarily relies upon three resources: its culture, its political values, and its foreign policies. According to van Ham (2008b), place branding is a part of soft power that revolves around "concepts like values, norms, and rules in international politics". However, soft power, like a nation's reputation, is dependent upon a considerable variety of factors, and the effect of place branding efforts on soft power may be marginal.

Place branding is also different from public diplomacy which essentially is government communication aimed at foreign audiences with the aim of shaping their attitudes towards the government's policies and strategic objectives or, as Szondi (2008) puts it, "to achieve changes in the 'hearts or minds' of the people". Public diplomacy is part of diplomacy, which has much broader goals and objectives. While public diplomacy can (and often does) serve as an instrument for place branding, its scope extends beyond that, encompassing other political, economic, or security policy objectives. On the other hand, place branding is not confined to public diplomacy, as there are various other tools available to communicate place brands. Gilboa (2008) describes place branding and public diplomacy as "similar in certain areas but very different in others". For Gilboa, similarities between the two terms include "image and symbols management, relationship building, and extensive use of the mass media", but the main differences include "goals or outcomes (..), means, types of communication, management, language, and culture".

Understanding public policy

As with place branding, there is no precise definition of public policy. It is an intuitive concept that is "maddeningly difficult to pin down" (Smith and Larimer 2018). The simplest definition of public policy could be "whatever governments choose to do or not to do" (Dye 2017). First of all, such definition implies that "the primary agent of public policy making is a government" rather than a private entity or any other actor (Howlett and Cashore 2014). Second, it foresees that policy can be both an action and an inaction, and that the government makes a deliberate, informed choice to implement or not to implement a public policy. And third, the definition encompasses the totality of government's actions and inactions, which may be considered a comprehensive but sometimes inaccurate description of what public policy is. For instance, one could question whether the choice to purchase wallpapers for a government office falls within the realm of public policy (Page 2018).

Other definitions of public policy are often more specific as they distinguish the intended objectives or purposes of public policy. For example, Anderson (2015) defines policy as a "purposive course of action or inaction undertaken by an actor or a set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concern". This definition implies that policy decisions are driven by specific goals or objectives. Laswell (1958) underscores two pivotal components of public policy: (1) policy goals and (2) policy means, operating at varying levels of abstraction. As noted by Howlett (2019), these elements can encompass a spectrum of activities, spanning from abstract principles associated with governance arrangements to more concrete administrative program specifications.

Certain authors delve even deeper into the description of public policy by attempting to identify distinct purposes it serves, for example, resolving conflicts related to limited resources, regulating behaviour, fostering collective action, safeguarding rights, and directing benefits towards the public interest (Theodoulou 1995). However, such lists are not exhaustive and may unnecessarily limit the scope of the definition. Multiple attempts have been made to develop typologies for public policies, with one of the most notable being by Lowi (1985), who categorized public policies into four types: (1) regulatory, (2) distributive, (3) redistributive, and (4) constituent. This classification has faced criticism, as many policies are complex and embody multiple qualities, making it impractical to categorize them using such a typology (Nicholson 2002). What is evident, however, is that, from a normative standpoint, both the means and goals of public policies should be directed toward the common good or, in Moore's (1995) terms, the creation of public value.

Understanding public policy is fundamental for crafting effective, evidence-informed solutions to complex challenges. This necessity has driven the emergence of public policy as a distinct research area. Public policy studies approach the multifaceted concept of public policy by examining it as a continuous process rather than a static set of isolated decisions or actions. Since its inception in the 1950s, the discipline of policy analysis has been closely associated with a perspective that views the policy process as unfolding through a series of distinct stages or phases. The conceptual framework of policy cycle has functioned as a fundamental template, enabling the systematization and comparison of various debates, approaches, and models within the field.

Lasswell (1956) introduced a model of the policy process consisting of seven stages: (1) intelligence, (2) promotion, (3) prescription, (4) invocation, (5) application, (6) termination, and (7) appraisal. Although there has been debate, especially regarding the placement of termination preceding appraisal, the model has proven highly successful as a foundational framework in the field of policy studies. It has served as the genesis for various typologies of the policy process.

Today, the prevailing approach to understanding the policy process involves five (Jann and Wegrich 2017) consecutive stages of the policy cycle (see Fig. 1):

1. Agenda setting: This phase involves identifying issues or concerns that warrant government attention. It is characterized by the dynamic interplay of public opinion, advocacy efforts, and problem recognition within the political sphere.
2. Formulation and design: Once an issue is on the agenda, policymakers engage in formulating potential solutions. This stage is marked by research, analysis, and the devel-
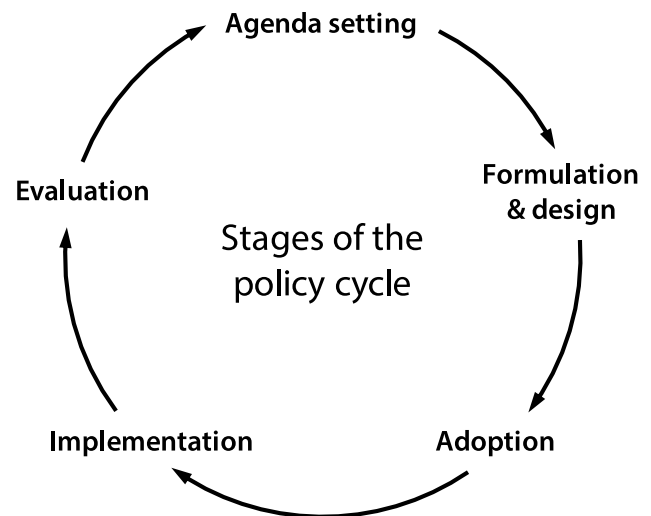

Fig. 1 Visual representation of the policy cycle framework

opment of policy proposals to address the identified problem.
3. Adoption: Policymakers assess the formulated options and select the most viable course of action. This phase often involves negotiations, trade-offs, and compromises among various stakeholders and decision-makers.
4. Implementation: With a decision made, the policy moves into the implementation stage, where government agencies and relevant actors execute the chosen course of action. This phase requires coordination, resource allocation, and the translation of policy into practical initiatives.
5. Evaluation: The final stage involves assessing the impact and effectiveness of the implemented policy. Evaluation provides insights into the success or failure of the policy and informs potential adjustments or future policy decisions.

While the policy cycle model is somewhat prescriptive and may not perfectly mirror real-world processes, it enjoys widespread acceptance as a valuable analytical model for studying public policies. Despite its limitations, this framework exhibits remarkable versatility, rendering it applicable to the analysis of virtually any public policy. Its capacity to encompass diverse policy domains underscores its significance as a foundational tool for comprehending a fundamental characteristic of public policy development: its iterative and cyclical nature.

Public policy and place branding

Before we delve into assessing whether place branding qualifies as a public policy, it is important to clarify the significance of such categorization. This holds pivotal importance

as it shapes the approach, governance, and accountability mechanisms associated with place branding initiatives. Considering place branding as a public policy provides a structured and systematic approach for the development, implementation, and evaluation of place branding, incorporating defined goals, stakeholders, and processes. This integration ensures that place branding aligns with broader public policy goals and priorities, fostering a more cohesive and sustainable development strategy. Moreover, as public policy typically emphasizes long-term planning, framing place branding within this context promotes a strategic, forward-looking approach rather than relying on ad-hoc, short-term initiatives.

Furthermore, treating place branding as public policy offers advantages such as clearer resource allocation, guaranteeing that funds and efforts are directed purposefully. This approach enhances accountability and transparency, particularly in the utilization of public resources. By subjecting the outcomes of place branding efforts to scrutiny, it further contributes to transparency and trust. Finally, given that public policy frameworks inherently involve community input and representation, situating place branding within this framework encourages citizen participation, fostering inclusivity and a sense of ownership among residents.

Approaching place branding through the lens of public policy offers significant academic potential. This perspective provides a structured framework for scholarly exploration, allowing researchers to delve into the complexities of place branding within established public policy frameworks. It encourages rigorous academic inquiry into the impacts, effectiveness, and challenges of place branding initiatives, fostering the development of theoretical models and empirical studies. By applying public policy theoretical and methodological approaches, scholars have the opportunity to contribute valuable insights to the academic discourse surrounding place branding. This alignment also facilitates collaboration with policymakers, translating academic research into practical policy recommendations for the effective development and management of places.

Conversely, there are potential disadvantages to considering place branding as a public policy. One notable drawback is the risk of bureaucratic complexities and delays inherent in public policy processes. Place branding, with its often dynamic and rapidly changing nature, may face challenges when subjected to the traditional, formalized procedures associated with public policy frameworks. Additionally, the politicization of place branding within the public policy domain might introduce partisan influences, potentially diverting efforts away from strategic and objective considerations. The rigid structures and regulations characteristic of public policy may also stifle the flexibility required for innovative and adaptive place branding strategies. Moreover, the extensive involvement of various stakeholders in the public policy realm might lead to conflicting interests and slow decision-making, hindering the agility needed for effective place branding responses to evolving situations. In essence, the institutionalized nature of public policy could present obstacles to the nimbleness and creativity often essential in successful place branding initiatives.

Returning to the question of whether place branding qualifies as a public policy, it is important to explore its alignment with the previously identified characteristics that define public policies. In summary, a public policy generally demonstrates the following qualities: (1) it is initiated and driven by the government, (2) it is purposeful, (3) it can involve taking specific actions or refraining from taking action, (4) it is a conscious and intentional decision made by a legitimate public authority, (5) it aims to address a problem or concern, (6) it is designed to create public value, and (7) its progression generally aligns with the policy cycle framework, offering a structured approach for its analysis.

When examining the first six key characteristics of public policy in relation to place branding (Table 1), it becomes apparent that place branding generally aligns with all these characteristics. Except for a limited number of place branding initiatives organised by private actors (for example, the *Born in Latvia* branding campaign organised by "The Red Jackets" association) most place branding activities are planned, adopted and implemented by a public body or on its behalf. Examples of such bodies include town or city councils at the local level, regional government bodies at the regional level, the national government at the national level, and supranational institutions such as the European Commission at the supranational level. While public bodies may delegate specific tasks related to place branding to private actors like PR agencies, the ultimate decision-making power and authority still reside with the public body.

Place branding is purposeful as it strategically employs various communication and marketing techniques and policy decisions to meticulously shape and convey a positive image of a place, thereby fostering a favourable perception and strengthening its reputation among target audiences. The objective of place branding is to cultivate a compelling narrative that captures the unique attributes, strengths, and aspirations of the place, positioning it as an appealing destination for investment, tourism, and other socio-economic opportunities. Place branding efforts are typically guided by a well-defined strategy that outlines the purpose and objectives of the intervention. This strategic approach serves as a roadmap, delineating the desired outcomes, target audience, key messages, and tactics to be employed in order to effectively shape the perception of the place.

The adoption of place branding is not a universally adopted practice, and different places make varying decisions regarding their engagement in branding efforts. While some places actively embrace and invest in place branding to

Table 1 Applying key characteristics of public policy to place branding

Public policy characteristics	Place branding
Government-driven	Except for a few private initiatives, the majority of place branding activities at the local, regional, or national level are carried out by public authorities or on their behalf
Purposeful	Place branding is a purposeful process of creating and projecting a positive image of a place in order to improve or enhance its reputation
Action or inaction	Place branding is not universally adopted, and while some places actively engage in branding efforts, others may choose not to do it
Deliberate decision	The decision to engage or not to engage in place branding is typically a deliberate choice made by the relevant public authority of the respective constituency
Solves a problem/addresses a concern	Place branding is primarily aimed at addressing the concerns of economic (trade, tourism, investment) or political nature. It can solve the problem of a place having a negative reputation or lacking a reputation altogether
Creates public value	While not always explicitly articulated, the ultimate goal of place branding is to improve well-being of the people

shape their image and reputation, others may opt not to pursue such initiatives. The decision to engage or not to engage in place branding is a deliberate, informed choice, often influenced by a variety of factors, including the specific goals, resources, priorities, and perceived benefits or drawbacks associated with implementing branding strategies. Therefore, the extent to which place branding is embraced can vary across different regions, cities, or countries, reflecting the diverse approaches and perspectives of respective authorities and stakeholders.

While it may not always be explicitly stated, the purpose of place branding is to enhance the well-being of the community it represents. By creating a positive image and reputation for a place, place branding aims to attract economic opportunities, foster tourism, and promote overall development. Ultimately, the goal is to improve the quality of life and prosperity of the people residing in the place being branded. By positioning the place favourably and leveraging its unique attributes, place branding seeks to address economic and political concerns, including those related to the negative or non-existent reputation of the place, generate economic growth, create employment opportunities, and enhance the overall social and cultural fabric of the community. Moreover, the process of place branding has the potential to "ignite a broad-scale debate of the values that a particular community is dedicated to uphold and to help determine how these values are to be interpreted" (Hereźniak and Anders-Morawska 2021).

As for the seventh characteristic—alignment with the policy cycle framework—it is pivotal to scrutinize the applicability of this framework to place branding policies. Testing the validity of this argumentation against the established stages of the policy cycle becomes instrumental in understanding the nature of place branding within the broader spectrum of public policy. If proven true, this not only strengthens the current analysis but also lays the groundwork

for future investigations. Validating the alignment of place branding with the policy cycle framework would provide a compelling rationale for further exploring the theoretical and empirical dimensions of place branding within the context of public policy analysis.

Case study: nation branding as a public policy

Methodological approach

To further examine the practical applicability of public policy framework to place branding, a comparative case study was conducted to investigate existing practices in different European countries. To facilitate a meaningful comparison among the studied cases, this research concentrated solely on nation branding as a subtype of place branding. As demonstrated in the previous section, place branding can be employed on different levels, however, the overarching objectives of these efforts and their fundamental characteristics remain largely consistent. While the paper does not specifically delve into the generalizability of the findings on nation branding to any place branding, it acknowledges that this issue could be a subject of further investigation.

The study was facilitated via an electronic questionnaire carefully designed to obtain a comprehensive overview of nation branding practices within each respective country, ascertain the institutional and legal framework governing these practices, and delineate the role of nation branding in relation to the public policy process. The questionnaire was six A4 pages long and consisted of ten sections covering the following eight topics:

- Nation branding campaigns and policies,
- Legal framework and policy documents,

- Institutions and stakeholders,
- Resource allocation,
- Preliminary research and policy design,
- Policy process, assessment and evaluation (3 interrelated sections),
- Policy audit,
- Gaps and challenges.

Each section comprised a main question accompanied by 2–4 sub-questions. All questions were open-ended, encouraging respondents to include additional comments or attach relevant documents. The time required to complete the questionnaires was not fixed, and, as demonstrated, varied significantly depending on each country's institutional setup, internal processes, and the availability of information. Initially, the deadline for responses was set at 60 days, but due to a lower-than-anticipated response rate, it was extended by an additional 90 days. A reminder was issued on day 135 (15 days before the extended deadline). Responses were collected between day 5 and day 177, encompassing a period of 27 days post-deadline. The average response time was 110 days.

The questionnaire was distributed to the public authorities of all 27 European Union (EU) Member States via diplomatic or official channels, inviting them to take part in the study. Specifically, 26 questionnaires were dispatched to the embassies of the respective Member States, accompanied by a request to forward the questionnaire to their pertinent national institutions. Additionally, one questionnaire was directly transmitted to the responsible public authority of the Member State where the author is situated. Seven EU Member States, namely Estonia, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Portugal, Slovakia, and Spain, provided complete answers to the questionnaire, enabling a detailed analysis. While the sample size may be considered relatively small, these countries collectively represent over a quarter of all EU Member States and encompass a diverse range of characteristics, such as geography, demographics, form of government, historical background, and socio-economic situation (see a comparative overview of some of the indicators in Table 2), making the sample overall representative of the EU-27.

In all studied cases, the responses to the questionnaire were compiled by expert-level officials, including civil servants and contract agents. These officials exhibited diverse profiles, ranging from diplomatic service to expertise in economics, trade, or tourism promotion, as outlined in Table 3. Notably, in the case of Estonia, two responses were submitted by distinct officials, reflecting the country's institutional arrangement, which assigns different responsibility areas to various institutions. While the author lacked control over the selection of the individual officials, this limitation carries minimal significance due to the official nature of the request, as the provided answers are regarded as representative of the countries as a whole, rather than specific individuals or departments.

However, certain limitations of the study should be acknowledged. First, the findings may not be entirely representative and may not be directly applicable to the contexts of other countries, particularly those outside the European Union. Second, the questionnaire method, although efficient for gathering empirical data, introduces the possibility that some of the contributions could be incomplete, inaccurate or biased. Therefore, in addition to the empirical data obtained through the questionnaire including the documents and sources referred to by the respondents, publicly available information on nation branding practices in these countries was also considered, where possible, to assess the validity of the study's findings.

Nation branding campaigns

All seven countries examined in the study have implemented nation branding activities which shared several common characteristics in terms of their format (see a comparative summary in Table 4):

Table 2 Comparative overview of the studied countries

Country	Area (km^2)	Population (2023 estimate)	Form of government	Real GDP (purchasing power parity, USD, 2021 estimate)	Real GDP per capita (USD, 2021 estimate)
Estonia	45 228	1 202 762	Parliamentary republic	51.531 billion	38 700
Italy	301 340	61 021 855	Parliamentary republic	2.478 trillion	41 900
Latvia	64 589	1 821 750	Parliamentary republic	60.457 billion	32 100
Luxembourg	2 586	660 924	Constitutional monarchy	74.045 billion	115 700
Portugal	92 090	10 223 150	Semi-presidential republic	347.694 billion	33 700
Slovakia	49 035	5 425 319	Parliamentary republic	173.582 billion	31 900
Spain	505 370	47 222 613	Parliamentary constitutional monarchy	1.798 trillion	37 900

Source: Central Intelligence Agency (2023). The World Factbook. Retrieved 20 November 2023 from: https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/

Table 3 Profiles of the respondents

Country	Institution	Respondent's role
Estonia	Government Office (*Riigikantseleii*)	Government Adviser
	Estonian Business and Innovation Agency	Project Officer
Italy	Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation	Deputy Head of Mission
Latvia	Investment and Development Agency of Latvia	Senior Project Manager
Luxembourg	Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs	Strategic Manager of the Luxembourg Brand Promotion
Portugal	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Diplomatic Institute)	Coordinator for Strategic Studies and Analysis
Slovakia	Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs	Diplomat
Spain	Ministry of Industry, Trade and Tourism	Head of Office

Limitations in time and scope

Most of the nation branding activities were not continuous efforts but rather finite, campaign- like initiatives with a clear start and end point, typically lasting several years. While some campaigns lasted less than a year (e.g., *Italy is simply extraordinary: BeIT* (November 2021–October 2022), some other campaigns lasted more than a decade, the longest being *Welcome to Estonia* (2002–2017) and *Portugal sou eu* (since 2011). The scope of most of the campaigns was also clearly limited, some being designed for a specific purpose or even a particular event, such as *Meeting Point Latvia—Energy is in our nature* designed for the country's participation in the 2017 EXPO fair in Astana, Kazakhstan.

The timeframe of the campaigns was not mutually exclusive, as evidenced by the concurrent implementation of multiple campaigns in several examined cases. There is considerable variation in the number of campaigns carried out by each country. While most countries reported having implemented one or two nation branding campaigns since 2000, Latvia and Portugal stood out with a significantly higher number of campaigns. Portugal reported having implemented a total of 10 different nation branding campaigns or policies, while Latvia has had at least 23 different campaigns (or attempted campaigns) since 1998. This discrepancy highlights the diverse approaches and strategies adopted by different countries in their nation branding efforts.

Defined objectives and strategic thinking

Each set of nation branding activities had specific objectives or even a strategic-level framework that guided its implementation. Such objectives typically included fostering tourism (*Destino Portugal* (2009)), expanding exports (*Portuguese Brands Project* (2002–2004)), attracting foreign investments (*Magnetic Latvia* (since 2017)), promoting certain values (*Marca España* (2012–2021)), or enhancing the country's reputation at large (*Good Idea Slovakia* (since 2016), *Luxembourg: Let's make it happen* (since 2016)). The complexity of the nation branding campaigns varied as well, ranging from single-objective-focused campaigns to multifaceted initiatives encompassing numerous sub-campaigns and smaller-scale endeavours targeting achievement of multiple objectives.

Typically, the nation branding policies of each country were founded upon a strategic policy framework document—a strategy (Estonia), a program (Luxembourg, Portugal), a plan (Spain), or a government report (Latvia, Slovakia). Out of all the countries, Italy was the sole nation that reported having implemented a program solely based on a Decree-Law (*Decreto-Legge 17 marzo 2020, n. 18*), without any other national-level framework document. An interesting example is Latvia, where the use of a national framework document, specifically a government report (*Informatīvais ziņojums*) was first introduced in 2020 prior to the start of the *Mission Latvia* campaign, whereas beforehand nearly two dozen initiatives were carried out without such a framework. This illustrates an evolution in the government's approach towards the planning, adoption, and implementation of nation branding policies.

Structured and targeted communication

The communication employed in most cases was planned, structured and featured a distinct motto or slogan along with a campaign-specific graphic identity (see Fig. 2). These elements were strategically designed to convey a unified and recognizable brand image for the nation, enhancing its visibility and appeal in the eyes of the target audiences. Most nation branding activities were primarily directed towards external audiences, however, in some instances, internal audiences were also considered, recognizing the importance of domestic support and engagement in the nation branding efforts.

Different countries adopted varying approaches in their strategic framework documents regarding the specific

Table 4 Summary of the case study

Country	Estonia	Italy	Latvia	Luxembourg	Portugal	Slovakia	Spain
Total number of reported policies	2	1	23	1	10	1	1
Overlapping policies	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Average policy duration[a]	11 years	1 year	2.3 years	8 years	5.5 years	8 years	10 years
Most recent policy	*Brand Estonia*	*Italy is simply extraordinary: BeIT*	*Mission Latvia*	*Luxembourg: Let's make it happen*	*Brand Portugal Project*	*Good Idea Slovakia*	*Marca España*
Main responsible institution for policy implementation	Estonian Business and Innovation Agency (formerly Enterprise Estonia)	Italian Trade Agency	Investment and Development Agency of Latvia (LIAA)	Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs	AICEP Portugal Global	Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation
Other stakeholders	Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, Government Office (Riigikantselei), Estonian Design Team, various public and private sector organisations	Pomilio Blumm S.r.l. (contractor), Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Ministry of Agriculture, Food Sovereignty and Forests	Ministry of Economics, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (formerly also Latvian Institute), Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Transport, NGOs	Sectoral ministries and agencies, professional chambers and other institutional partners, whole-of-society	Turismo de Portugal, five regional tourism entities, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Camões Institute, Ministry of Culture, Office for Cultural Strategy, Agency for Competitiveness and Innovation, Planning & Assessment, Agency for Administrative Modernization, Regional Development Coordination Commissions, Inter-municipal Communities, municipalities, NGOs, tourism operators, academia, diaspora	Ministry of Transport, Construction and Regional Development, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport, Slovak Tourist Board, Slovak Investment and Trade Development Agency, Slovak Olympic Committee, Eximbank, external experts	Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Tourism, TourSpain, ICEX Spain Export and Investments, Regional tourism authorities and export promotion agencies, Chambers of commerce, NGOs
Participatory process	Stakeholder consultations	No	Expert focus groups	Citizen consultations	Diverse focus groups, public consultations	Public opinion survey	Stakeholder consultations
Funding source	National budget	National budget	National budget	National budget	EU funding, national budget, own revenue	National budget	EU funding, national budget, own revenue, private contributions
Preliminary research	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Limited	Yes
Ex-ante policy assessment	Yes	No	No	No	Limited	No	Yes

Table 4 (continued)

Country	Estonia	Italy	Latvia	Luxembourg	Portugal	Slovakia	Spain
Interim policy evaluation	Yes	Limited	Planned	Yes	Limited	Limited	Limited
Ex-post policy evaluation	N/A	Planned	No	N/A	Limited	N/A	Limited
Policy audits	No	No	No	Yes	Limited	No	No

[a]In most cases, the implementation of the nation branding policies is ongoing. Hence, the calculated average policy duration may be shorter the actual policy duration

target countries or the global scope of their campaigns. For instance, countries like Latvia and Spain explicitly listed target countries in their frameworks, indicating a more focused approach. On the other hand, countries such as Estonia, Luxembourg, Portugal, and Slovakia opted for a broader, more global approach, aiming to reach audiences beyond specific geographic boundaries. These diverse approaches reflect the countries' respective objectives and strategies in positioning themselves in the international arena and shaping their desired image among international stakeholders.

Public resources and institutions

All the countries analysed in this study have allocated public funding to support their nation branding initiatives. In some cases, these initiatives were solely funded by the public sector, predominantly sourced from national budgets, with occasional contributions from regional or local government budgets. However, there were also instances where private stakeholders participated in co-funding certain nation branding endeavours (Spain, Portugal). It is worth noting that the level of public funding allocated to nation branding varied across the examined countries. This variation can be attributed to several factors, including the size of the country, its economic capacity, and competing budgetary priorities. These factors play a significant role in determining the extent of financial resources dedicated to nation branding efforts in each country.

All the studied countries have established dedicated structures that are responsible for nation branding. These structures are situated within institutions of direct administration, such as ministries, typically ministries of foreign affairs, or ministries of economy, or executive agencies subordinate to these ministries. The structures are staffed with dedicated full-time personnel (civil servants and/or employees) and have operating budgets to carry out their functions (varying between 1,1 and 50 million euro per annum, according to the data provided). Although the primary coordinating role of nation branding policies was generally carried out by the public sector, it is important to note that in some cases, public companies or even private companies were involved in the implementation of specific tasks related to preliminary research, policy design, and implementation. This involvement often took place through subcontracting or procurement of services. While the overall decision-making authority remained with the public sector, the engagement of these external entities reflected a collaborative approach to effectively execute different aspects of the nation branding initiatives.

Fig. 2 Examples of nation branding campaign logos

Policy process of nation branding

To explore how public policy perspective can be used to study nation branding, this section employs a step-by-step analysis of the chosen nation branding policies. The analysis is guided by the five steps of the policy cycle framework introduced in the previous section.

Agenda setting

Across all the cases studied, it was observed that the impetus to develop and implement nation branding initiatives was primarily raised as a political issue. In Estonia, Latvia, Luxembourg, and Portugal, the discussions and debates surrounding nation branding began as early as the 1990s or early 2000s. The underlying motivation behind these initiatives remained consistent across the studied countries, as there was a recognised need for a coordinated approach to projecting a unified and positive image of the nation in external communication.

However, a notable observation is the lack of evidence-informed policy making in the implementation of nation branding initiatives. While most of the countries recognised the importance of research and empirical evidence and reported having conducted preliminary research, it is important to note that the sole existence of preliminary research on nation branding does not necessarily imply evidence-informed policymaking. The need to implement nation branding initiatives was never subject to significant questioning across the studied countries. The preliminary research into the matter conducted or commissioned by the respective countries' public administrations investigated policy options rather than assessed the necessity and the potential impact of such campaigns. Furthermore, no policy option of not implementing any nation branding activities was identified in any of the studied countries.

In several instances, the preliminary research involved case studies of nation branding in other countries, serving as a justification for supporting chosen policy options. For instance, in the case of Luxembourg, the preliminary research included an examination of nation branding practices in Switzerland. Similarly, Slovakia's research on nation branding incorporated case studies from Finland, Norway, and Sweden. In Latvia and Portugal, the timing of the research being commissioned raises questions about its classification as 'preliminary', as the research in these cases was undertaken after the decision to implement a specific nation branding policy had already been made.

As a general principle, the impetus to develop nation branding initiatives often originated from civil servants within the respective public administrations. However, the decision to actively pursue nation branding policies was ultimately made at the political level. It was common for governments to include the creation and promotion of a unified and positive image of the country as a political goal in their official programs. This was particularly evident in countries such as Latvia, Luxembourg, and Portugal, where the commitment to nation branding was explicitly stated in the government's programs. The political endorsement of these initiatives underscored their significance and provided a clear mandate for the implementation of nation branding strategies.

Policy formulation and design

The policy formulation process in the selected countries primarily took place within the institutions of public administrations, such as ministries of foreign affairs, ministries of economy, or executive agencies operating under these ministries. These governmental entities played a central role in shaping and developing the nation branding policies. However, it is important to note that in some cases, the process involved multiple stakeholders, which were coordinated through an interinstitutional working group format.

For instance, in Latvia, the External Image Policy Coordination Council was formed to coordinate the nation branding

efforts. This council comprises various members from different sectors, including multiple Cabinet members such as the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Economy, Culture, Education, and Science. Additionally, representatives from the Chancery of the President, the Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, the Prime Minister's Office, the State Chancery, the Director of the Latvian Investment and Development Agency, a member of the Board of the Riga City Tourism Development Bureau, as well as representatives from key non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the Latvian diaspora abroad, are also part of the Council.

In Slovakia, the inter-ministerial Working Group for Coordinated Presentation of the Slovak Republic was established under the framework of the Government Council for Export and Investment Promotion. The Working Group is responsible for coordinating the activities of various institutions involved in presenting Slovakia abroad, including the Ministry of Transport, Construction and Regional Development, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Slovak Tourist Board, Slovak Investment and Trade Development Agency, Slovak Olympic Committee, Eximbank, and external experts. In Luxembourg, an interinstitutional committee composed of representatives from various ministries, administrations, sectoral promotion agencies, professional chambers, and other institutional partners proposes and implements the main guidelines for the country's brand image promotion.

It is important to note that despite the existence of these inter-institutional structures, there is limited substantial evidence to support the active engagement of these diverse stakeholders in the formulation of nation branding policies. However, it is worth noting that some of the countries examined in the study have reported engaging different stakeholder groups and gathering consolidated opinions through specific processes at the policy formulation stage. For instance, Latvia and Portugal have used focus groups to gather input and perspectives from various stakeholders to support the formulation nation brand value proposition. Slovakia has gone a step further by conducting public opinion surveys, which provide a broader representation of the public's views and preferences.

A significant gap at the policy formulation stage observed in all countries is the quasi-absence of impact assessment for the proposed nation branding policy options. The framework documents frequently include quantitative indicators (e.g., numbers of tourists, volumes of foreign direct investment) without providing a clear justification of how these indicators are influenced specifically by the nation branding policies under consideration, as opposed to other factors. This lack of comprehensive impact assessment poses a significant challenge in understanding the effectiveness and potential outcomes of the nation branding initiatives. Without a robust assessment of the causal relationship between the policies and the desired outcomes, it becomes difficult to determine the extent to which the chosen strategies and interventions yield the intended results.

Adoption

In most of the studied nation branding campaigns, the decision to implement them was made by the highest executive decision-making body of the government, typically at the Cabinet level. This highlights that nation branding is fundamentally a matter of government choice, as it is up to the government to decide whether to pursue such initiatives or not. This decision-making process is typically informed by a report prepared by the civil servants and presented to the government by the responsible minister. The involvement of the bureaucracy in preparing policy options does not necessarily imply a consensus at the political level, for example, Latvian Prime Minister publicly criticised the proposed nation branding strategy for being "incomprehensible" (LETA 2021), but the strategy was adopted nonetheless due to the absence of any other policy options.

Overall, the decision-making process regarding nation branding policy options in the examined countries lacks substantial evidence of being informed by empirical research or expert analysis. Instead, political considerations and priorities appear to play a central role in shaping these decisions. This is evident not only in the formulation of nation branding policies but also in the allocation of financial resources for their implementation. The emphasis on current political priorities, rather than a strong foundation of scientific evidence or expert judgments, raises concerns about the effectiveness of the nation branding policies. None of the countries examined in the study have reported conducting a complete ex-ante assessment of the proposed policy options prior to their adoption, highlighting a major gap in the nation branding policy process.

The evidence suggests that the process of adopting nation branding policy options in the studied countries lacks transparency. In all seven countries, policy framework documents contain broad goals and objectives spanning multiple years, but they lack specific details regarding concrete measures, responsibilities, timescales, and indicators. This lack of specificity hinders effective monitoring and evaluation of the policy implementation, making it difficult to assess progress and outcomes.

Implementation

The ongoing implementation of nation branding policies in the studied countries limits the ability to carry out a comprehensive and thorough analysis. Nevertheless, it is possible to make initial observations based on the information currently

available, albeit limited. Most of the countries examined in the study have chosen a centralised approach, where a specific public body is designated as the competent institution responsible for the implementation of nation branding policies.

In Luxembourg, the implementation remains at the ministerial level, with a dedicated unit (*Promotion de l'image de marque*) established within the General Secretariat of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs. In Estonia, Italy, and Latvia, this function is performed by executive agencies—Estonian Business Innovation Agency (formerly known as Enterprise Estonia), Italian Trade Agency, and Latvian Investment and Development Agency, respectively. In Portugal, the competent institution responsible for nation branding is a public company—AICEP Portugal Global. Slovakia and Spain have adopted a decentralised approach, with multiple public bodies sharing the responsibility for implementing specific nation branding policy objectives. Moreover, in Spain, clear distinctions can be observed between the national, local, and regional government levels regarding their involvement in nation branding, the latter holding a considerable share of responsibility in this domain. This diversity in approaches highlights the different organizational structures and strategies adopted by countries to manage and coordinate their nation branding policies.

Generally, the tracking of progress in the implementation of nation branding policies in the studied countries has been carried out by the respective competent authorities, although the specific approaches employed slightly vary among the countries. In some cases, countries have established periodic interim evaluations as part of their monitoring mechanisms. These tools serve as opportunities to evaluate the progress achieved thus far and identify any areas that may require improvement. By conducting these evaluations, countries can gauge the effectiveness of their policy implementation, make necessary adjustments, and ensure that the desired outcomes are being achieved. The use of periodic evaluations enables a systematic and iterative approach to the implementation of nation branding policies, allowing for ongoing assessment and refinement of strategies as needed.

The lack of transparency and accountability presents a significant challenge in the implementation of nation branding policies, as illustrated by the case of Latvia. In June 2023, the Investment and Development Agency of Latvia faced public criticism for its questionable allocation of resources. Specifically, the *Mission Latvia* policy budget was used to procure 41 000 China-produced tiny water flasks with the campaign's logo for participants of the traditional Nationwide Latvian Song and Dance Festival. The high cost and perceived uselessness of the flasks stirred controversy, raising concerns about the responsible use of public funds. The agency's argumentation that the memorabilia gifts were distributed to ensure publicity and foster domestic support to the policy was received with scepticism, given the excessive nature of the expenditure. This example underscores a disconnect between the intended purpose of nation branding, which typically involves strategic efforts to enhance a country's image, and the allocation of public resources for seemingly unrelated items.

The outsourcing of policy implementation tasks to private contractors, notably communication agencies, intensifies transparency challenges. Although collaboration with private entities is often essential for effective nation branding strategies, the potential risks of mismanagement and a lack of public trust in institutions become more pronounced in the absence of robust oversight mechanisms. This practice not only raises concerns about the appropriate use of public resources but also underscores the importance of establishing clear guidelines and accountability frameworks. To foster public confidence, it becomes imperative to strike a delicate balance between engaging private expertise and maintaining a transparent and accountable decision-making process in the execution of nation branding initiatives.

Evaluation

Similar to the implementation phase, examining the evaluation aspect of nation branding policies presents challenges, as some of these policies are still in the process of implementation. However, it is noteworthy that less than half of the countries included in the study have reported conducting ex-post evaluations of their nation branding policies in the past. Luxembourg and Spain have undertaken such evaluations, while Italy has plans to conduct them in the future. In Portugal, evaluation of nation branding activities has been limited to the context of EU funding projects, focusing on specific project scopes rather than an overall policy evaluation. This indicates a significant gap in conducting comprehensive and holistic evaluations of nation branding policies across the studied countries.

Furthermore, the number of countries that have reported conducting audits of their nation branding policies is even fewer. Luxembourg stands out as having conducted an audit in 2019–2020, performed by external auditors. Spain has recruited external auditors in the past, although no systematic audits are conducted due to their high costs. In Portugal, periodic internal and external audits of the entities involved in nation branding policy implementation have been conducted, but nation branding itself has not been the focus of separate audits. On the other hand, Estonia, Italy, Latvia, and Slovakia have not reported conducting any audits of their nation branding policies. This highlights a notable lack of comprehensive auditing practices to evaluate the implementation of the nation branding policies in these countries.

Major challenges in the policymaking process

As demonstrated above, the application of the analytical framework of the policy process to nation branding proves to be a valuable approach for studying these initiatives. A detailed examination of each step in the policy cycle unveils significant challenges encountered by governments (see Fig. 3). By employing this framework, researchers and policymakers gain insights into the complexities and nuances of nation branding, paving the way for more informed policymaking.

In summary, the most apparent challenges at each step are as follows:

Agenda setting

- Limited role of preliminary research: The agenda setting stage encounters a challenge in the limited incorporation of preliminary research. Despite recognizing the importance of research, the process often falls short in leveraging empirical evidence to inform the initial decisions concerning nation branding policy development. This limitation compromises the depth of understanding necessary for effective agenda setting.
- Focus on policy options, not necessity; absence of 'status quo' option: The agenda setting process primarily concentrates on delineating policy options rather than critically assessing the necessity for nation branding initiatives. Moreover, the absence of an evidence-informed 'status quo' option, an alternative that questions the need for new policies, limits the spectrum of considered possibilities. This hinders a thorough examination of whether

nation branding is imperative, potentially leading to the adoption of strategies without adequate scrutiny of their necessity and relevance.
- Potential lack of holistic understanding: The deliberations at the agenda setting stage (both at the expert and political level) often fall short in capturing the intricate interplay of cultural, socioeconomic, geopolitical, and other factors, resulting in a fragmented understanding of the challenges and opportunities. This lack of holistic understanding of nation branding, its instruments and processes impede the development of a comprehensive nation branding agenda that truly reflects the multifaceted aspects crucial for effective policy formulation and implementation.

Formulation and design

- "Empty", unambitious policies due to compromises between stakeholders' interests: Compromises made between diverse stakeholders' interests often result in diluted and generic nation branding policy frameworks. The pursuit of consensus may lead to policies lacking specificity, vision, and effectiveness, as the attempt to appease varied interests may result in a watered-down approach that fails to address the core objectives of the nation branding initiative.
- Absence of ex-ante impact assessments: The failure to conduct thorough ex-ante impact assessments before policy adoption hampers the ability to foresee potential consequences and systematically evaluate the feasibility and potential effectiveness of the proposed policies. The absence of this anticipatory evaluation phase risks
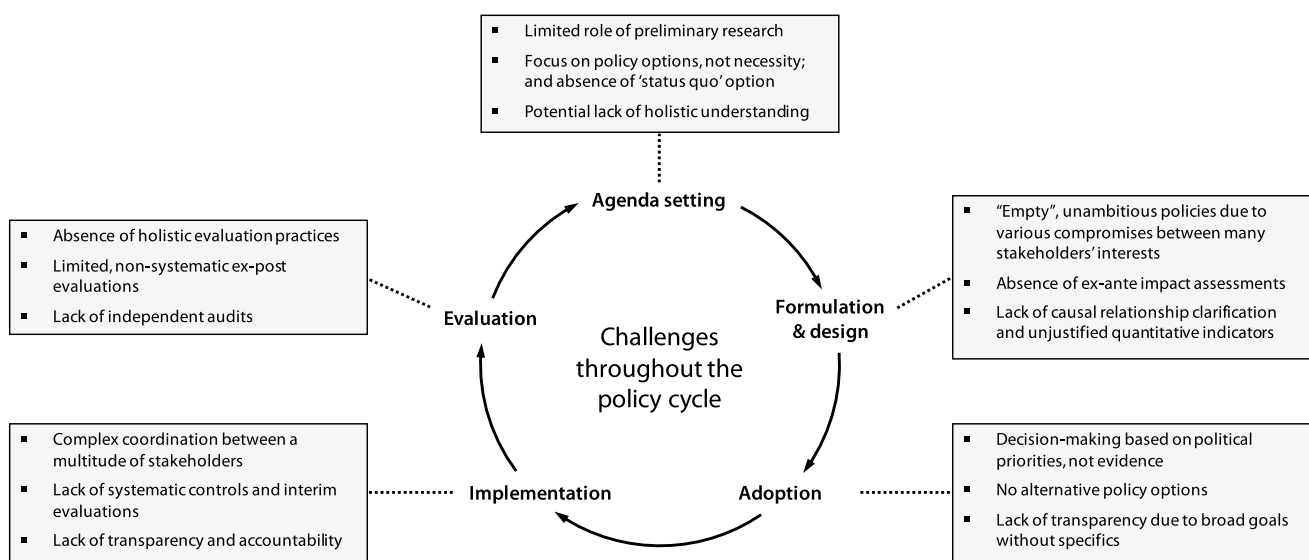

Fig. 3 Identified challenges in the nation branding policy cycle

adopting policies without a comprehensive understanding of their potential impact, limiting the ability to make informed decisions and potentially leading to suboptimal outcomes, such as policies achieving marginal impact, if any.

- Lack of causal relationship clarification and unjustified quantitative indicators: The challenge arises from a dual issue—first, a lack of comprehensive clarification on the causal relationship between nation branding policies and desired outcomes, and second, the incorporation of quantitative indicators without a clear justification of how these metrics specifically relate to the impact of the considered policies. This dual deficiency hampers the ability to establish a robust cause-and-effect link between implemented strategies and measurable results, thus undermining any measurements of the effectiveness of the nation branding initiatives.

Adoption

- Decision-making based on political priorities, not evidence: Decisions primarily driven by political priorities rather than evidence-informed considerations can result in the adoption of nation branding policies that may be more aligned with short-term political goals than with a well-grounded understanding of their scope and potential impact. The dominance of political considerations can compromise the overall effectiveness and strategic alignment, as well as sustainability of the adopted policies.
- No alternative policy options: The failure to explore diverse strategies or consider a range of approaches limits the decision-makers' ability to make well-informed choices. The absence of alternative options may result in the adoption of policies without a comparative understanding of potential benefits or drawbacks, potentially overlooking more effective or sustainable solutions.
- Lack of transparency due to broad goals without specifics: When policy framework documents lack detailed information regarding concrete measures, responsibilities, timescales, and indicators, the decision-making process becomes opaque. This lack of specificity hinders effective scrutiny and understanding of the policies being adopted, making it difficult for stakeholders and the public to assess the rationale and expected outcomes of the nation branding policies.

Implementation

- Complex coordination between a multitude of stakeholders: The involvement of various central, regional and local government institutions, agencies, private entities, and civil society organizations in the implementation of nation branding policies requires intricate coordination

mechanisms. The failure to navigate this complexity may lead to disjointed efforts, conflicting strategies, and a lack of synergy in the execution of nation branding policies, ultimately compromising the overall effectiveness of the implementation process.

- Lack of systematic controls and interim evaluations: Without a structured mechanism for monitoring progress and conducting interim assessments, there is a risk of losing sight of the policy's effectiveness. The lack of periodic evaluations makes it difficult to identify emerging issues promptly, adjust strategies, and ensure that the implementation aligns with the intended goals.
- Lack of transparency and accountability: When the processes and decisions involved in the implementation of nation branding policies lack transparency, it becomes challenging for stakeholders and the public to understand the rationale behind specific actions. This lack of clarity hampers accountability, as it impedes the ability to trace decision-making and assess the alignment of actions with the initially defined policy objectives.

Evaluation

- Absence of holistic evaluation practices: Given that numerous factors beyond the explicit interventions of nation branding policies impact a nation's image and reputation, and considering the interconnectedness of these policies with other policy areas, evaluating nation branding policies becomes challenging. This underscores the need for holistic evaluation practices that go beyond simplistic measurements and account for the multifaceted nature of nation branding. Employing impact mapping methodologies tailored to nation branding policy ecosystems can provide a more nuanced understanding of the interactions between the policy and various other factors contributing to its overall impact.
- Limited, non-systematic ex-post evaluations: The lack of comprehensive, systematic ex-post evaluations limits the thorough examination of the outcomes and impacts of implemented nation branding policies. This constraint results in incomplete insights into the success or failure of these policies, hindering the ability to draw meaningful conclusions for future policy development, particularly during policy transitions, where the replacement of one policy by another offers a valuable opportunity for learning and applying lessons from past experiences.
- Lack of independent audits: Only 2 out of 7 countries have reported conducting any form of nation branding policy audits. In the realm of nation branding, where success pivots on widespread public support, the role of external scrutiny through financial and performance audits becomes paramount. This dual scrutiny, addressing both sound financial management of taxpayers'

money and policy effectiveness, goes beyond administrative compliance; it provides a foundation for iterative policy refinement, ensuring adaptability, as well as establishes a basis for building and sustaining public trust in the institutions responsible for implementing nation branding policies.

The implications of policy approach to place branding

The challenges identified at each stage of the policymaking process carry profound implications for the success of nation branding policies. The limited role of preliminary research in agenda setting jeopardizes informed decision-making, potentially leading to strategies lacking a solid empirical foundation. Compromises between stakeholders' interests in formulation and design risk diluting policies, and the absence of ex-ante impact assessments hampers foresight into potential consequences. Decisions driven by political priorities risk policies that align more with short-term goals than a well-grounded understanding of their impact. In the policy implementation stage, complex coordination may lead to disjointed efforts, and a lack of transparency compromises accountability and impedes the assessment of alignment with defined objectives. The absence of holistic, systematic evaluation practices, including external audits, hinders sound financial management and policy effectiveness, and undermines public trust—an important factor for nation branding success.

Based on the considerations discussed, it is apparent that place branding falls under the purview of public policy. The perspective employed in the previous section clearly demonstrates the potential of employing a public policy framework to study place branding. From an academic standpoint, it contributes to the conceptual understanding of the subject and enables the study of place branding policies within the broader context of the public policy ecosystem. This research approach has the potential to inform policy making in the field of place branding. For practitioners, adopting a public policy framework offers valuable opportunities. It provides a structured approach for formulating effective place branding strategies and policy options, while considering the broader context of other sectoral policies. By doing so, it allows for better horizontal coordination and integration of place branding efforts with other policy areas. Moreover, using a public policy framework addresses the long-standing issues of transparency and accountability in place branding initiatives.

The question of whether place branding should be regarded as a distinct public policy domain remains a matter of subjectivity. However, drawing parallels to the classification of tourism policy (Jenkins et al. 2014), it is arguable that place branding merits recognition within the realm of public policy. For scholars, it enables a specialised research focus, promoting theoretical advancement, and fostering a holistic understanding of place branding policy. For policymakers and practitioners, it offers an opportunity to develop evidence-informed strategies, implement targeted interventions, and evaluate place branding initiatives, thereby addressing issues of transparency and accountability associated with place branding. Furthermore, considering place branding as a separate policy area facilitates the integration of place branding policies into broader public policy ecosystem, including regional development, economic, and foreign policy frameworks, allowing for a more coordinated and cohesive approach.

Regarding future research, there is significant value in exploring how different instruments associated with the public policy process can be effectively applied to study place branding. One area of focus could be the development of appropriate evaluation frameworks specifically tailored to place branding policies. By examining the specific evaluation frameworks and methodologies used in the context of public policy, researchers can identify and adapt those that are most suitable for evaluating the outcomes and impacts of place branding efforts. This may involve considering indicators and metrics that capture the multidimensional nature of place branding, such as reputation enhancement, economic development, tourism growth, or social cohesion. One potential research focus could be to test the applicability of complex, policy ecosystem-oriented impact evaluation methodologies that include multiple impact monitoring tools, such as impact pathway mapping, impact inventories, portfolio analyses, and case studies (see Neicu et al. 2020).

Additionally, studying the application of other instruments associated with the policy process, such as policy formulation and implementation tools, stakeholder engagement strategies, or policy monitoring mechanisms, can provide valuable insights into how these can be effectively used in the context of place branding. Furthermore, comparative studies across different countries and regions can help identify best practices and lessons learned in applying public policy instruments to place branding. Such research can inform policymakers and practitioners in their efforts to design and implement effective place branding strategies, leading to more evidence-informed decision-making and ultimately enhancing the outcomes and impacts of place branding initiatives.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author states that there is no conflict of interest. While the author is a civil servant of the Republic of Latvia, the present research was not conducted in his official capacity. The views and opinions expressed in this research are solely those of the author as an academic researcher and do not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the Latvian government or any other institution.

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Mihails Potapovs is a lecturer and Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Political Science of the University of Latvia. In addition, he holds a senior position with the Latvian Ministry of Defence. He received a master's degree in international security from Sciences Po Paris, France. His current research interests include nation branding, strategic communication, public governance, and European Union policies.